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ABSTRACT

Using the acquisition of United States citizenship as an indicator, Koreans have shown a remarkable degree of success in cultural and social adjustment to the mainstream of American society. Nevertheless, a certain amount of confusion and conflict is expected during their period of transition and adjustment. American teachers must be aware of the cultural background of their Korean students. The Korean culture is governed by five major ethical principles, based on Confucian teaching, defining codes of interpersonal relationships between father and son, elder and young, husband and wife, ruler and subject, and friends. Korean cultural differences are also apparent in non-verbal behaviors: expressions of thought, interpersonal relationships, manners and courtesies, privacy, gifts, and gestures. Given a better understanding and knowledge of the conflicts the Korean child and family are faced with, the American teacher can prove to be an invaluable aid to the student's full and constructive adjustment to the mainstream of American society. (MK)

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THE KOREAN LEARNER IN AN AMERICAN SCHOOL

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SECTION III
PART D

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THE KOREAN LEARNER IN AN AMERICAN SCHOOL.

As Milton Gordon points out in Assimilation in American Life,[1] the process of cultural and social adjustment manifests itself in two styles: cultural adjustment and structural assimilation. Cultural adjustment occurs when an individual immigrant has undergone an extrinsic and/or intrinsic change from his own cultural patterns to those of the main society. Structural assimilation is a longer process and it is accomplished when the immigrant has made entrance into cliques, clubs and institutions of the host society on a primary level and has been accepted by members of the dominant society.

In studying the process of cultural adjustment of the Korean immigrants and their children, the following sociocultural factors must be outlined for the benefit of the American teacher who has Korean children in the classroom.

First, the early Korean immigrants to the Hawaiian Islands in 1902 to 1904 were different from the more recent immigrants who have come to the United States since 1965. The early Koreans were peasants and laborers who had lost their means of livelihood in Korea as a result of continued bad crops, inflation, and exploitation by corrupt government officials. In contrast, the recent immigrants are well educated and highly skilled in their professions, and have expectations of success in their struggle to attain a better life for themselves and their families. 71.1 percent of all Koreans in the United States have completed high school, as compared with the U.S. average of 52.3 percent. Even more striking is the fact that 36.3 percent of all adult Korean immigrants have college educations, while only 10.7 percent of the American population have achieved equivalent levels. This alone has numerous implications. Unlike most of the immigrants of the earlier period, the post-1965 Korean immigrants are from the urban middle class. They have been exposed through their education - which disseminates information, knowledge, and skills on the basis of objective, rational, and scientific principles - to some of the social and cultural complexities of life which are shared by highly urbanized, industrial, and technological societies regardless of their cultural differences.

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[1] Milton Gordon. Assimilation in American Life, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 71.

Second, no longer does America have the need in her complex, industrial society as she once did to seek the unskilled, uneducated, and illiterate. On the other hand, for those immigrants who have acquired the background of basic social and vocational skills required of modern industrial urban dwellers, America has made their adjustment easier and faster by such means of social acculturation as education and mass media.

The flow of new immigrants tends to concentrate within highly urbanized, industrialized areas, especially since 1970, and therefore their children are clustered in schools in and around the major cities.

Among Asian immigrants, Koreans have shown a remarkable degree of success in cultural and social adjustment to the mainstream of American society, using the acquisition of U.S. citizenship as an indicator.

Nevertheless, a certain amount of confusion and conflict is expected during their period of transition and adjustment.

In a broad sense, the cross-cultural differences between Americans and Koreans can be said to be the differences between Occidental and Oriental people. But further detailed observation may show that each act and almost every object has an indigenous touch, a distinction which marks it for the sensitive observer as Korean, rather than Chinese or Japanese, and as American rather than English or German.

CHARACTERISTICS AND MODIFICATIONS OF THE KOREAN CULTURE.

The Korean culture is governed by five major ethical principles based on Confucian teaching which remains the "bible" of the traditional Korean to this day. The five basic codes of interpersonal relationships are between: father and son; elder and young; husband and wife; ruler and subject; and friends.

1. Affection between father and son. Traditionally, affection is never demonstrated openly. However, one would give his life for the other. The father is the disciplinarian, and is very strict. Relationship between young and old are orderly and formal. The father is the respected and unquestioned head of the family, and he rules with almost absolute power if he so desires. He has full responsibility to feed the family, to find work for the members, to approve all

decisions, marriages, and the future life of the younger members of the family, especially the son. During the lifetime of the father, the son must submit to his father's desire and advice. The son must regard his own plans and desires as secondary and subject to the father's approval.

This relationship is still maintained to a high degree in American Korean homes, where father and son are friends, and as "pals" they will go fishing, make major purchases such as a house or car, and do things together whenever they find time without the female members of the family. The father still prefers to remain in his traditional role, but this is broken up in the effective influence of the father's role over his son. For example, when children bring in homework and ask for help, a father who does not speak English or who has limited English-speaking ability often puts himself into hopeless situations. Naturally, the father must maintain his dignity, and yet this Korean cultural situation forces the child to lose confidence in his father. As a result, the son may well become disrespectful toward his father, and the father might lose his dignity and become upset. Eventually, the father and the son reach a state of continual frustration.

2. Respect for elders. Relationships among members of the family are always "vertical" rather than "horizontal". Elders are superiors in the home and should be revered and honored, both in word and deed. Because of a Korean cultural pattern of nuclear and extended families, the grandparents are most respected. To be called grandfather or grandmother is a sign of respect. For example, every home in Korea, no matter how poor, allots the best room in the house and serves the finest delicacies to the honored grandparents. The manner in which elderly people are sometimes shunted aside in the United States or the concept of an "old people's home" is considered extremely barbarous and shocking to Koreans.

In the United States, a clash of values has taken place. No longer are the grandparents given the best rooms or meals. Instead, perhaps for economic reasons, things are shared more equally. But they are still respected and their status in the family is still unquestioned. Children are now being exposed to the American way of living and are questioning the one-way communication at home, except for their grandparents, whom they continue to respect.

Speech is highly honorific to elders and superiors and this honorific speech is still used. Traditionally, the eldest son's obligation is to care for his parents. Boys enjoy freedom and girls are restricted, but this has changed to a great degree. All children, male and female, cooperate in the care of the elderly, and in some cases, supplement the family income.

Proper role behavior is taught during childhood and adolescence, but has been modified greatly by the new immigrants. Girls are taught home management, housekeeping, sewing, and culinary arts, but now enjoy more freedom than ever before. This trend is still developing. Prevalent in the United States is the feeling that it reflects unfavorably on parents if a child misbehaves. However, this has been modified as sexual discrimination decreases in the United States. Girls are now entering new fields, as is the case in the dominant society.

3. Discretion between husband and wife. Men still feel superior to women and girls. Traditionally, women are faithful, cooperative, quiet, and unquestioningly dutiful. The wife's place is at home and she is expected to fit into her husband's family or perish. The historical life of Korean women has always been one of obedience and humiliation. If we look at the Confucian "Way of the Three Female Obediences" and "Seven Reasons for Expelling a Wife", we may know the traditional women's situation. The three obediences are: When young, woman is obedient to her parents; when married, to her husband; and when old, to her son. The seven reasons are: If she does not serve her parent-in-law; if she has no children; if she is lecherous; if she is too jealous; if she has an incurable disease; if she talks too much; or if she steals.

Christianity has introduced a new appreciation of the value of the individual, especially of women. The impact of Christianity and modernization has greatly changed the situation of Korean women. Women are more verbal and more involved in the care of children, as well as in household management. They are equal to men today. A working mother in an American Korean home, with her independence, becomes more assertive within the family.

4. Justice between ruler and subject. For centuries, Koreans were subject to the caste system, which divided society into the yangban nobility and the commoners. This is also the American Korean school of thought. The Fall of Yi Dynasty and equality for all came in the early 1900's, due mainly to Christian influences.

Koreans have great respect for learning and scholastic achievement, and education is taken very seriously by nearly every Korean. Therefore, teachers are held in high esteem. This respect for the teacher is carried over to the United States. Teachers are considered parents away from home and should never be contradicted. There is a cultural shock because of the greater freedom here. Children see others standing up to, and talking back at their teachers. It is equally shocking to the Korean parents and their children when the teachers are on strike.

It is rude to call a person by name without due discretion; an honorary title has to follow the name of an older or more prominent person. The Korean language is devoid of an acceptable title equivalent to "Mr." There the most widely used Korean term is sənsaeng nim (teacher) for one's superior. When a younger person becomes a professional and is higher in social standing, the parents' acquaintances address the younger person in a formal manner. The younger person can demur and ask not to be honored.

5. Trust between friends. To be ready to help, guide, and counsel a friend is a very strong principle with the Koreans. Korean children are family oriented. This concept is still maintained in America by all generations. Old friends of parents are called "uncle" and "aunt", furthering the concept of the extended family. Peers do not mean as much to Korean children as they do to American children. In the first immigrant group intermarriage was taboo; those who did intermarry often met open hostility. The new immigrant group has continued fairly close to traditional ways. However, those who came here during the period of war brides were those who had intermarried with other Asian Americans, or American blacks or whites. There is now practically no hostility as a result of this period of common intermarriage. Members of the third and fourth generation have intermarried to a greater extent than those of the second generation.

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICANS AND KOREANS IN NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR.

In America, the Korean children in schools, at homes, and in their immediate environment, as well as their parents, are going through an intense period of cultural transition and adjustment and they must modify and reorder their ingrained values, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs.

An understanding of the cultural differences in non-verbal behavior could be one of the most important areas in which to point out the differences of non-linguistic forms of the communication process between Americans and Koreans.

Whether American or Korean, we are unique individuals. There are differences in our behavior and, therefore, there are differences in our judgments about the behavior of others. The most consistent of the differences between Americans and Koreans can be described as cultural differences.

Many of us think of a culture in terms of tangible physical things: housing, food, clothing, dances, festivals, and the like. But culture can be defined as the material and nonmaterial aspects of a way of life which are shared and transmitted among members of a society. All this is learned behavior. Much of this learning is informal and it starts when we are first beginning to speak and understand our environments. The early years of childhood are important, in terms of learning the nonmaterial aspects of our culture, and in the development of our personality.

Cross-cultural differences between Americans and Koreans in nonverbal behavior are mentioned here in terms of: expressions of thoughts; interpersonal relationships; manners and courtesty;and privacy, gifts, and gestures.

1. Expressions of thoughts.

Expressive and non-expressive: The American way of thinking and showing facial expression is direct, accurate and candid, while the Korean way can be said to be vague, indirect, non-expressive, and passionless. The American teacher who has Korean children in the classroom should expect that it will take a certain amount of time for the children to adjust to American ways of thinking and showing expression. Meanwhile, the Korean child is most likely to behave in a passive, non-participatory way unless the teacher calls him or her by name or asks anyone to answer a question.

American couples smile at their weddings, looking happy, but in Korea neither the bride nor the bridegroom is supposed to smile. They should look serious before and after as well as during the ceremony. In Korean society, one is regarded as light-hearted or frivolous if he shows enthusiasm. Americanized parents are most likely to show enthusiastic facial expressions. This is an indication that the teacher can communicate with the parents with ease.

When one is overjoyed with another person's magnificent generousity or when one faces sad affairs, it is considered a virtue to hide one's own feelings. In this case, Koreans can detect whether others are really pleased with them or are dissatisfied with them, by what is called nunchi. Nunchi is a kind of "sense", but it cannot simply be explained as "sense". Nunchi is an interpretation of others' facial expressions or what they say plus a mysterious "alpha" hidden in their inner hearts. Nunchi is usually an interpretation by the lower social class of the feelings of the higher class, necessary in an unreasonable society in which logic and flexible rules have no place.

Americans do not compromise or concede when it is contrary to common sense, regardless of the rank of the other person. But in the case of Koreans, if they try to explain something to a superior on the basis of common sense, this is regarded as impertinent and reproachable. Therefore, there is no other way but to solve problems with nunchi detecting the other person's facial expression, plus, the "alpha" hidden within his inner heart. For example, it is not unusual for the parents to scold the child by saying "Don't you have nunchi?" when the child says or does something wrong in a situation where the child should have made a common sense judgment and should not have said or done.

The Korean method of social intercourse, to pretend to like something though it is bad and to pretend to dislike though it is good, has different implications than the method of the American who publicly dissects and analyzes everything. And yet, when Koreans get angry and lose their tempers, they do not hesitate to reveal their feelings in angry words or fist-fights, regardless of onlookers. Paradoxically, they change from sheep to bulldogs.

Direct and specific versus indirect and general: The American way of thinking is direct while the Koreans' way is indirect. When Americans love, without exception they confess, "I love you". But Koreans, even if they are Americanized, don't directly spit out the word "love". Love and hate are emotions subtly shown by expressions on the face instead of being stated. In Korea, one does not praise another's generosity, kindness, hospitality, and honesty by verbalizing directly. They just appreciate the others' goodness from their inner hearts.

Americans tend to move from the specific and small to the general and large. Americans progress from personal and local issues to those of the state and finally of the nation. But Koreans tend to move the other way around. It is more comfortable for Koreans to start with a general or larger part and then narrow down to specific facts.

If a Korean asks an American about an overall goal, a basic theory, or a principle, he is confused by a flood of statistics or a long description of method before he hears of any overall purpose of plan. Americans, on the other hand, feel equally frustrated when they ask for a specific fact or detail only to be subjected to twenty minutes of theory or philosophy without a single concrete fact. This totally opposite approach to thinking affects negotiations, plans and attitudes.

This is perhaps the influence of contrastive structural and functional characteristics in the two languages. English is a SVO, Subject-Verb-Object language and Korean is a SOV language. Since language is inextricably bound to culture, the teacher might need a certain degree of patience when the Korean child tries to tell something and it takes quite awhile before he or she gets to the point.

In response to a negative question in Korean, one says "yes" when one wants to answer it in the negative, while one says "no" when one wants to answer it in the affirmative. The Korean "yes" does not necessarily mean a positive answer but simply means, "What you've said is correct" and "What you've said is incorrect". So if you state a question in a negative way, the Korean answer turns out to be the opposite of English "yes" and "no", which affirms or denies the FACT rather than STATEMENT of the facts. The teacher might have experienced this kind of the situation with the Korean child in communication.

2. Interpersonal relationships.

Family relationships: There is little concept of equality among Koreans. Relationships tend to be almost entirely vertical rather than horizontal; every individual is relatively higher or lower. Even in a family all are in a vertical relationship: older brother to younger brother, older sister to younger sister.

While in America each person is respected as an individual, in Korea all human relations are similar to family relations. For example, Koreans commonly

call unrelated persons who are older "grandfather", "grandmother", "elder brother", "elder sister", "uncle", or "aunt", and they call younger persons "younger brother" or "younger sister".

Gaps between generations result from these patterns and this traditional family system. Even in the family circle the elders and the young have no opportunity to associate together. Nearly always, social relations are between the same age groups and the same sex. So generation by generation and sex by sex, they build isolated societies which cannot communicate thoughts to the others. But in America, each individual personality is recognized without strict age or sex classifications.

In Korea, the children of grades one through six are segregated into confined classrooms, the boys sitting toward the front or rear rows, or in the left or right section of the classroom, and the girls in the other section. These children are not told or warned that there will be mixed seating in the open-classrooms of urban American elementary schools. Students of grades seven through twelve are completely segregated into boys' and girls' middle and high schools. In the Intermediate and Senior high schools of the United States students are seated together in the classrooms. Nevertheless, Korean boys voluntarily segregate themselves, not only from the majority of students, but particularly from the girls in the classrooms, cafeteria, and playground. Korean girls do the same with respect to the boys. Sex education, as practiced in American schools, can be an additional adjustment. Most of them have not had an adequate sex education, or in many cases they have not received any.

The Old and the Young: There is no term for "brother". One must say whether the brother is older or younger, and so goes every term used to denote family relationships. Grandfather and grandmother are the most respected terms. To grow old has many advantages. Old people must be pampered and appeased and the elderly are expected to retire and live with their sons and to be supported by them.

Male and Female, Wife and Husband: There is no doubt that the theoretical position of the male is predominant. The husband is traditionally the respected and unquestioned head of the family, and he rules with almost absolute power if he so desires. He has full

responsibility to feed the family, to find work for the members, to approve all decisions, marriages, and the future life of the younger members of the family. Some of these traditional relationships are broken up in the immigrant families. Roles are changing and women are becoming more independent and assertive within the family, especially in homes where the wife is employed.

Public display of affection is ridiculous and amusing and deserving of public scorn among traditional folks. A Korean wife never rushes to embrace her husband at an airport or railway station and never kisses her husband in public even when they meet after several years' absence.

In America, men stand up when a lady comes into the room. But in Korea it is quite the contrary. In America, men do a good deal of housework - taking out the trash, helping wash dishes, and doing the laundry. In Korea, no man is supposed to help with cooking, dish washing, or laundry. It is considered taboo for a man to enter the kitchen. If the Korean boy willingly participates in a cookie making activity in the class, it would be an indication of a smooth cultural adjustment. It would be the same if the Korean girl participates in a soccer game on the playground.

3. Manners and Courtesies.

Eye Contact: When the teacher "talks" to the American child, he or she would expect the child to look straight into the teacher's eyes and listen. When the teacher "speaks" to the Korean child a child does not look straight into the teacher's eyes; instead, the child's eyes and head are held down or to the side, a cultural trait of showing respect for one's teacher. In America the pattern is just the opposite. The American teacher misunderstands this form of non-verbal communication and tends to misjudge the child from then on, based on this first impression. It might take a while to readjust this kind of mannerism.

Drinking: In Korea, you never fill your own glass, but always pour for someone else. When you finish your glass, you pass it to a friend, holding it with both hands. He takes the glass, you pour wine into his glass, using your right hand and with your left hand lightly supporting your right arm. Everything is

passed this way, with the right hand holding the object and the other hand lightly supporting the right arm. Not to do so is an insult. The Korean child is most likely to do this in the same manner when he or she gives something to the teacher.

Eating: Americans seem to find silence uncomfortable. They babble on to fill any quietness if it extends for more than a moment. Koreans eat solemnly and it is perfectly all right for one to make noises while chewing or drinking soup. Koreans chew and suck audibly, an indication that one is enjoying the food. But in America, it is considered impolite for one to make noises while eating or drinking, though it is necessary to talk. In Korea, even during the meal, belching, coughing, or hiccuping is all right, but blowing one's nose is prohibited. But in the United States, quite the opposite. One has to excuse himself each time he belches, coughs, or hiccups. But blowing one's nose is permissible. Picking one's teeth after a meal is perfectly all right, while in America, it is impolite and should be avoided until you are alone.

4. Privacy, gifts and gestures.

Privacy: Privacy is extremely important in America, while in Korea we do not even have the word "privacy". So it is difficult to translate this word into Korean. Ignoring privacy, a Korean's first questions to strangers are usually: "How old are you?"; "What is your income?"; "How much did you pay for your coat?"; "Why don't you get married?". Koreans are curious to know others' personal affairs by saying in greeting: "Where are you going?" or "How come you are here?".

Americans find it awkward to stand close to one another, and they often back away a few inches. Koreans do not avoid bodily contact. While getting on a bus or train, in a crowded market place, or while watching sports, Koreans do not hesitate to push others, whereas in America touching, let alone pushing, is taboo. This is due to a larger "personal space" which Americans feel they must maintain to feel comfortable, unless they are family, lovers, or close friends.

Gifts: In America, gifts are usually small and simple - a true gesture rather than a gift - while in Korea the gift is rather expensive. Gifts should not usually be opened in the presence of the donor. Gifts are supposed to be opened in private, but in the United States, the gifts are usually opened in the presence of the donors to show immediate appreciation. Even a gift of food offered to the house is not opened in the giver's presence or shared with him, for fear this would embarrass him.

Thank-you letters are vague and do not mention the nature of the gift, but in the United States it is polite for one to specify the nature of the gift in the thank-you letter. Here again the idea of directness and indirectness is involved.

Gestures: In America, "thumbs up" indicates "okay" or consent and "thumbs down" indicates disagreement or "no", whereas in Korea, "thumbs up" means "the best", "number one", or "boss".

Waving of a hand, palm outward, with a vertical motion means "good-bye" in America, while the same movement signifies "come here" in Korea. Koreans count by bending fingers from the thumb to the small finger in order with one hand, while Americans use both hands. There are different sexual connotations between America and Korea in using fingers and hands: in America, to point with your middle finger is taboo, while in Korea, inserting a thumb between the second and middle fingers of the same hand or brushing the outstretched palm of one hand over the fist of the other hand implies sexual relations. The teacher should understand these connotations because there have been incidents related to gestures involving the Korean student, especially on the high school level. For example, an ESOL student from another country learns these connotations from one Korean student and uses them against another Korean student when they are involved in an argument which leads to a fight.

Forming a circle with your thumbs and your second finger signifies "money", while in America, this means a strong "okay". Koreans use their palms as scratch paper to write Chinese characters or foreign words or to do simple arithmetic, but Americans seldom write on their palms. Shrugging one's shoulders with a light movement of hands upward implies "I don't know" in America, while Koreans do not have the same movement but just shake their head horizontally to show the same meaning.

Americans put a sympathetic hand on a person's shoulder to demonstrate warmth of feeling or put an arm around him in sympathy. But in Korea, younger persons are socially prohibited from putting their hands on elders' shoulders or from tapping the shoulders of elders, although these restrictions do not apply to seniors' tapping the shoulders of people younger than they. To put one's hands in his pockets while talking with others, especially with seniors, is avoided among Koreans.

Through this brief introduction to Korean culture and cross-cultural differences between Americans and Koreans in nonverbal behavior, it is hoped that by giving a better understanding and knowledge of the conflicts the Korean child and family are faced with, the American teacher can prove to be invaluable aid to a student's full and constructive adjustment to the mainstream of American society.

June, 1978
Harold S. Chu